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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000596

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECIN](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [AR](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN FOREIGN MINISTER NALBANDIAN VISITS
ISTANBUL

Classified By: DPO Sandra Oudkirk for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: On November 24, Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian visited Istanbul in order to pay a working visit to the headquarters of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). In addition to BSEC-related meetings, Nalbandian also called on Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II and met with Turkish FM Babacan. There were very well attended press conferences following both the address to BSEC members and observers and the Babacan meeting. Press reports on November 25 and columns on November 26 were largely factual and positive. One of BSEC's most useful aspects is the way in which its routine processes facilitate meetings like the Nalbandian - Babacan one that otherwise would be much more difficult and sensitive to arrange. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (C) Armenia assumed the BSEC presidency in October. Following normal BSEC practice, FM Nalbandian presented the priorities of the Government of Armenia for its six month term as BSEC President to representatives of the BSEC member states and observers at BSEC headquarters in Istanbul on November 24. Immediately following the official presentation, FM Nalbandian held a press conference, which was broadcast live on Turkish television. Unlike previous presentations by BSEC foreign ministers, FM Nalbandian's visit drew a great deal of attention from both the Turkish and international press with approximately 100 journalists crowding the press conference.

¶3. (C) Nalbandian's prepared remarks both to the official BSEC group and to the media focused on Armenian government's priorities during its term as BSEC President including: the development of regional transport networks, formulation of an integrated BSEC regional energy strategy and integrating national strategies on environmental issues. Nalbandian also underscored the need to cooperate to face the global financial crisis. Questions from the media included whether BSEC was an effective organization and requests for more details on specific goals/plans during the Armenian Presidency. In reply Nalbandian noted that there were over 60 events on the calendar for Armenia's six-month term and stated he was focused on improving BSEC's visibility and continuing work with other international organizations such as the UN.

¶4. (C) During a November 26 meeting, Armenian Permanent Representative to BSEC Amb. Garen Mirzoyan told us that the Nalbandian visit went very well from the Armenian perspective. Nalbandian's one-on-one meeting with Turkish FM Babacan lasted an hour and would have gone longer if Babacan had not needed to catch flight. According to Mirzoyan, Nalbandian's discussion with Babacan focused on the Armenian government's primary goal of restoring normal diplomatic relations with Turkey. Mirzoyan indicated the meeting was "generally positive" and indicated that Yerevan was still digesting the discussion, but was otherwise noncommittal.

15. (C) Questions from the media at both press conferences on bilateral Turkey - Armenia issues prompted a very positive response from Nalbandian, who noted that Armenia is "ready to open its borders" and that normalized relations were in the best interests of both Turkey and Armenia. In his view there were no major barriers to normalizing relations and he hopes normalization can occur "very soon." He noted that Armenia is waiting for Turkey to make an approach and that the normalization process must be handled "smartly and with precision." Mirzoyan explained that Armenia views diaspora calls for recognition of the Armenian genocide, an effort he explained no Armenian government would ever oppose, as completely separate from the government - to - government track. Normal relations between neighboring countries are essential, and Armenia has not delivered an ultimatum on the subject of genocide to the government of Turkey, he explained.

16. (C) Mirzoyan noted that when normal diplomatic relations resume between the two countries diplomatic staff will be hard pressed to deal with the pent up demand for consular services on the part of what he estimated to be 10,000 to 15,000 Armenians currently living and working in Turkey without residency/work permits and in some cases travel documents. He explained that until 2005 Russia provided some adhoc consular support for Armenian citizens living in Turkey based on Armenia's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, this arrangement has now ended and his staff, despite being accredited to BSEC not Turkey, are constantly subjected to requests for assistance from expatriate Armenians.

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17. (C) Comment: BSEC is often criticized both by member states and by outside parties for being a talking shop and lacking the ability to effect coordinated action or change in the greater Black Sea region. BSEC is working to become a more effective, project oriented institution in response to these criticisms. However, BSEC does play an important role as a forum for discussions both by providing a mechanism for BSEC member state officials (at all levels up to and including ministers) to meet on a broad range of issues as well as by making meetings such as the Babacan-Nalbandian one less difficult and sensitive to arrange. End Comment.
WIENER